

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL
SCIENCE DEVELOPMENT: INDIA

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Development of Social Science Research in India

The tradition of social science teaching and research in India is now almost a century old, beginning with the introduction of modern university system of education in the country during the third quarter of the last century. Following the British tradition of liberal education, the education system in India incorporated social sciences as an important component of college curricula. It was natural in the beginning that the contents of social science teaching and research in India primarily aimed at dissemination and elaboration of the received theories and concepts of the European, especially the British social science. But soon, a trend developed, in a limited but a significant way, of questioning the relevance and validity of such propositions and concepts and of asking specifically Indian questions, though still following the methodology and logic of the British classical thinking. This trend also became, subsequently, an integral part of the ideology of the national movement for independence. While this trend continued on the basis of individual and isolated efforts, it could not grow on an organised and institutional basis due to the hostile attitude of the British government towards thinking which could foster, directly or indirectly, nationalist feelings. The mainstream social science teaching and research, therefore, continued to be

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positivist-theoretic and rather unquestioning in approach. Nevertheless, a corpus of social science knowledge developed, which combined with the growing body of factual information through official and individual efforts, on the one hand, and increasing strength and maturity of national movement leading to the questioning of all things foreign, on the other, led to the emergence of an independent body of thought and literature, particularly during the 1930's and 1940's, mainly exploring a path for India's socio-economic regeneration and development after independence. In this process, the exposure of the Indian intellectuals, both academic and political, to the socialist development in Soviet Russia, and rise of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political and intellectual scene emphasising, swadeshi (indigenous) element in thought and action played an important role in shaping the contents of new socio-economic thinking.

After Independence, social science teaching and research grew at an unprecedented pace. There took place a manifold increase in the number of professional social scientists due to the expansion of higher education system. The multitude and diversity of problems that surfaced themselves once the country embarked upon a programme of planned socio-economic development, provided tremendous scope for enquiry and research by social scientists. In terms of contents and method, the holistic and trans-disciplinary approach of the pre-Independence

period gave way to the specialised and discipline-based studies, both on account of the need to study various problems in their specificity and to the growing specialisation in the various social science disciplines into separate departments in the universities. Discipline-based social science research, with a strong empirical bias, experienced a rapid growth. The questioning of accepted Western doctrines and propositions which had started even in the pre-Independence period got further fillip as the fresh evidence based on the experience of socio-economic development in the country in its various sectors and aspects started coming up. The need obviously was felt both by development planners and policy makers and academic social scientists to carry out more and more empirical investigations. Researches resulted in throwing up a large volume of useful information, no doubt, which in many cases was fruitfully utilised to examine certain accepted propositions on relationships among socio-economic variables. But most research attempts stopped short of formulating alternative hypotheses, propositions and theories. Most researches could thus suggest that the received theory does not explain a phenomenon, but little emerged by way of positive statement on its explanation. To a certain extent, it was an inevitable result of the dominant methodological framework utilised in most studies. The Indian social scientists for the first time had a large scale exposure to and interaction with the American social science tradition

carried out during mid-seventies. The formation of ICSSR itself, with the promotion of social science research as its main objective, helped considerably in the process of acceleration of research output.

Social Science Research and Teaching

The large volume of useful information on different socio-economic aspects thrown up by research studies succeeded in exploding certain myths about the Indian society. It also brought out evidence to question several theoretical propositions on the interrelationships among socio-economic variables and in many cases, provided direction for formulating alternative propositions. All this advancement of knowledge, has not, however, got adequately reflected in the teaching of social sciences. A manifold increase has taken place in the faculty and enrolment in social sciences in the ever increasing number of universities and colleges; and practically all university or university level institutions, numbering over 120 now, offer courses in most social sciences, in their campuses and in numerous colleges affiliated to them. There are today over 1000 post-graduate departments in social science disciplines in the universities, colleges and institutions, and most of them have been established during the last few decades. In a large number of these institutions, particularly colleges located away from

metropolitan centres, however, research activity is virtually non-existent. This is one reason why the classroom teaching in social sciences has not been able to absorb the new information and findings generated by research. But the syllabi and text books in social sciences have also been slow in picking up new research findings due to various reasons. There seems a general inertia to change the contents of courses; most standard textbooks used are foreign and those written by the Indian scholars also get patterned after them, with hardly any significant effort towards genuine indigenisation. And, also, the research findings themselves are not always of such definitive nature as to get included easily in the syllabi, textbooks and classroom instructions.

The cleavage between research and teaching in social science seems to have also been accentuated to a certain extent by the recent developments in the organisation of research necessitated by the need to augment research output in various socio-economic aspects of development. Earlier, most research work was carried out in the universities by their faculty engaged in teaching as well. Today, there are three major sectors in the field of social science research in India : Universities, non-university research institutions and the government. In recent years the university system, in general, has come under serious stresses and strains of various kinds, the

most important being the overcrowding of the institutions of higher education. As a consequence, the university research has got confined primarily to the doctoral degree research, where again, the increasing numbers have started telling upon the quality. In any case, doctoral research has its constraints in terms of its capacity to deal with contemporary issues with the required degree of comprehensiveness. There is also a tendency on the part of university community to look down upon research on topical and policy issues as 'inferior' to the more fundamental, philosophical and theoretical research. On the whole, the growth of university research in social sciences, has not kept pace with the expansion of the university system and research themes have also generally ignored the swift pace of changes taking place in the society.

A large part of the social science research today is going on in organisations established either exclusively or mainly for conducting research. Most of these institutions of social science research have come up during the last two decades, in the wake of somewhat restrictive atmosphere of the university system for promotion of research, on the one hand, and increasing realisation on the part of the social scientists and policy makers of the increasing need for research on various aspects of economic development and social change taking place in the country, on the other. These institutions have an advantage over the university

system in terms of the time their members can devote to the research problem on hand, and relative flexibility of the administrative procedures they follow. Of late, they seem to have scored over the universities in terms of the research output and variety of research themes. Many of them receive regular assistance from the government, quite a few within the framework of the ICSSR; but all of them get most of their research funds from governments or their agencies. In view of the absence of regular teaching in their scope of activities, researches in these institutions do not get directly incorporated in class room instructions, except in a limited way and with a time lag after the research results get published.

The governmental research system has gone beyond data collection and occasional descriptive reports. Various departments of Union and the State governments have their research wings undertaking regular and occasional studies on the subjects of immediate interest to them, including those attempting internal evaluation of their schemes and programmes. It is presumed that such studies serve very useful purpose as input in policy formulation and implementation. Most of this research is, however, highly specific in scope and empirical in content, and is often for 'official use only'. Therefore, its contribution and usefulness towards enriching social science disciplines in teaching and independent research is highly limited.

The Focii of Social Science Research in the Context of Planned Development

It is significant to observe that the needs of policy and programme formulation, implementation and evaluation have led to increasing realisation of importance of and greater responsiveness to social science research by the government and official agencies during the recent decades. It has been reflected in the governmental support to research institutions and research studies through financial assistance, organisation of discussions and seminars on government initiative on various themes of policy relevance and research interest with substantive participation from the social science academics, and involvement of the social scientists, particularly economists, in policy and programme formulation either by way of appointment of academics in official positions or of consultations in formally constituted committees on various subjects. Particularly in the Union Government, practically every Ministry and Department has social scientists on its staff, most of whom have earlier been teachers or researchers in academic institutions, for a shorter or longer period.

This encouraging trend notwithstanding, it would be unrealistic to assume that social science research is being directly used by the government. That is not possible; nor would it even be desirable from the viewpoint of a healthy growth of social sciences that research is undertaken primarily with a policy

measure in view. But a large part of research on socio-economic aspects of development results in conclusions with implications for development strategy and policy; and it is not always made use of by the government. A hiatus exists between the research and policy formulation in so far as most of the research is ignored by the policy makers as 'academic', and to a certain extent the researchers also fight shy of working on issues of direct policy relevance; and findings of their researches are often too guarded and qualified to be directly useful to the administrators and policy makers. Unfortunately, it does not seem to have been adequately recognised that there is an inevitable and direct relationship between analytically sound scientific research and rational policy formulation; no research devoid of academic or analytical rigour could be good research, and any research cannot be useful for policy formulation without being good. The dichotomy between academic research and useful research is, therefore, false. There are, no doubt, indications that such a realisation is developing among policy makers as well as social science researchers.

In India the processes of planned socio-economic development and of development of social sciences have gone together in the post-Independence period. Inevitably, therefore, the themes and contents of social science research have been mostly related to the problems of socio-economic change. In fact, the

basic objectives of planning, namely, rapid growth of the economy, self-reliance and social justice have been the main focii of the social science research during the last three decades. Investigations into conditions accelerating growth of agriculture and industrial output, social and economic implications of the process of rapid industrialisation, relationship between social structure and growth in rural areas, spatial dimensions of development, role of political institutions particularly at the grass root level in the process of planned socio-economic change and demographic aspects of development are some of the major themes around which most social science research has centered. Obviously, all these themes were directly related with the pattern of development envisaged through the instrumentality of planning. The fact of planning as a vital aspect of India's economic system was easily recognised and accepted by the social scientists and the themes of their research started to incorporate increasingly the dynamic element of socio-economic processes. Thus economic studies have now growth and change as their main focii as distinguished from the static aspect of stability and equilibrium emphasised earlier. The sociological studies of, say, caste system, shifted from their ritual and formalistic aspects to the changing relativities accompanying the efforts for planned social and economic development, and anthropologists' studies have shifted emphasis from the portrayal of typical characteristics of villages and tribes to their changing structure, power relationships and emerging stresses and tensions.

After about 20 years of planning, sometime during the middle 1970's, the question of poverty and inequality despite achievement of considerable growth in output, came up as the main themes of national debate on public policy and development strategy. The social scientists in India responded to these trends by concentrating on the equity and distributive aspects of development programmes. Large number of studies on poverty, income distribution aspects of new technology in agriculture, and of the emerging pattern of industrial growth, and on the problems of specially disadvantaged groups were undertaken to highlight these aspects. At the same time, the issues of emerging social tensions on regional and communal lines were also becoming a source of anxiety to all, and social scientists' response to this situation was reflected in their research efforts to investigate into the historical, economic and social roots of such trends, on the basis of studies at a macro level as well as specific micro studies of specific occurrence.

Thus the major themes of social science research have emerged as responses to the questions posed by the policy and strategy of development, on the one hand, and emerging socio-economic and political trends, on the other. The social scientists have mostly followed the lead given by the developments taking place at the level of national policy making or in different aspects of social life. The lead-giving task of social science research has been rather limited.

Ideological Parameters of Social Science Research

It is not only that the research focii and themes have mostly followed the pattern of national concerns and priorities, the national ideology has also influenced social science research to a large extent in terms of certain basic postulates regarding political, economic and social parameters. The Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Indian Constitution on democracy, freedom, secularism, equality and social justice are accepted by mainstream social scientists in India as desirable goals; they are rarely questioned, and are taken as given parameters of research on economic, social and political issues. Similarly a system of planning to manage development is also generally accepted. Researches may focus on the need for improvement and reorientation of planning system, but rarely question its necessity and desirability. That the traditional social structure based on caste system is unjust and needs to be changed in a more equitable direction; and that untouchability is a social evil, and needs to be eradicated, are accepted values in social science research. Objective studies investigating into the causes of communal and regional tensions have harmony and national integrity as their ideological framework. Similarly, the need and desirability to modernise the social and economic structure of the country is implicit in most social science research, though there might be differences among social scientists as to what 'modernisation' should mean.

Thus certain overall parameters of national ideology are explicitly or implicitly accepted by social science researchers, with little or no serious questioning of their desirability. Even questioning of their feasibility has the exploration of means of achieving them as its implicit objective. The social scientists have, however, not always accepted the politically dominant ideology of the party in government in respect with the routes and strategies to achieve the national goals and priorities. It is difficult to recall any policy measure which did not evoke critical comments from social scientists. Though it may not necessarily be due to the dissenting voices of the social scientists, it is interesting to observe that most social and economic policy measures in India endeavour to strike a balance between extremes : ideology of industrialisation is pursued along with emphasis on agricultural and rural development, large scale industrialisation is sought to be counterbalanced by small sector development; positive discrimination of minorities and disadvantaged groups is combined with efforts at integrated development; tribal development programmes are a mixture of preservationist and integrating measures; and public sector hegemony is intertwined with promotion of growth in private sector. Such attempts at balance may be the result of the compulsions of the objective conditions obtaining in the society and economy, but they do provide scope for debate, discussions and research on alternatives by social scientists.

Relative Roles of Social Science : The Primacy of Economics

The major concerns of India as a politically independent nation have been economic in nature : underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment. It has been assumed that most social problems could also be tackled only with measures of economic development. Social scientists have, by and large, accepted these premises, notwithstanding some questioning of the validity of this 'deterministic' approach. Some evidence has been thrown up by sociological and anthropological studies to the effect that economic growth not only does not resolve all the problems but also leads to the emergence of new problems. Yet the overall priority to economic growth has been recognised, and resolution of old and new problems is mainly sought within the economic domain, by varying the pattern of growth.

It is envitable, therefore, Economics attained the major importance in terms of relevance to the problems of the Indian society. Among various social sciences, Economics had the fastest expansion in terms of teaching facilities, faculty and enrolment, as well as priorities and resources available for research. Economics would account for almost one-thirds of the total university and college faculty and enrolment in the seven major disciplines recognised as social sciences by the ICSSR and University Grants Commission. The research studies sponsored and financially supported by the important national agencies like the

Planning Commission are almost all on economic themes, and even of those supported by the ICSSR which deals with all the social sciences a substantial proportion is in the subject of Economics.

It is being increasingly realised, no doubt, that many of the important issues needing investigation (e.g. education, national integration) should be tackled in a thematic rather than disciplinary manner; and efforts are being made by institutions to study them on a trans-disciplinary basis, utilising the knowledge and expertise of scholars from different disciplines. Yet since the university system follows in teaching the disciplinary division as generally recognised in Western social science, with little scope for inter-disciplinary interaction, such efforts often tend to suffer from the lack of analytical rigour. Thus while disciplinary division is essential for specialisation and rigorous analysis of certain specific problems, it seems to prove inadequate in dealing with some of the important problems of the society. In fact, a view seems to be emerging that most of the crucial problems facing the Indian society, even including slow growth of economy, or dynamics of caste system which were considered to be exclusive domains of economists and sociologists respectively, are complex and not amenable to diagnosis, explanation and solution on the basis of a single discipline based analysis.

Issues of Indigenisation and Relevance

Researches in different social sciences have won wide recognition both on the count of new information they have provided on the socio-economic processes in India and of the fresh insights and propositions they have advanced for their explanation. Most of them have begun with the dominant theories developed in the West, but in the process of investigation significant modifications have been introduced, sometimes, to an extent that the models look predominantly indigenous. Elaborately detailed specifications and significant modification of assumptions of the basically Western models of growth, have led to improve understanding of the growth process in a developing country, emphasising structural rather than purely linear nature of relationships between investment and output. Similarly, the uniqueness of the meaning of 'modernisation' has been convincingly questioned emphasising the context-specific interpretation of the phenomenon and its processes.

Significant advances made in conceptual and interpretative aspects of research on specific social phenomena, however, do not add up to what may be termed as 'indigenous' theory of economic and social change. One wonders if such a theory is feasible or even desirable. Given at least a minimal universality of causations in socio-economic phenomena, the claim of indigenisation of theory would very much depend on the meaning of the terms 'theory' as well as 'indigenisation'. The fact that certain

concepts and propositions developed in a particular land due to its advantage of chronological precedence of educational and scientific development, does not necessarily make these concepts and propositions 'alien' in other lands. The framework of analysis, in terms of the number and relative importance of different variables, could and does differ with the objective socio-economic conditions of countries and regions, and also due to differing values of the systems to the extent study and research in social sciences can hardly be value-free. In this sense indigenisation could best be interpreted in terms of inclusion of locally relevant variables in the model or framework of analysis, their specifications to suit their local contents, and definition of the purpose and direction of research in conformity with the accepted value system. Indigenisation would thus imply 'relevance' in terms of the capability to explain, predict and prescribe in the specific national context. In this sense, social science research in India can be said to have achieved significant advance during the last few decades.

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The social science community in India, has however, developed a healthy sense of dissatisfaction and inadequacy in terms of 'relevance' of their research efforts; and the process of introspection and self-examination is on. Several discussions have been organised in recent years to review the past and on-going research in social sciences in this perspective. The question

as to how theoretical rigour and social relevance could be combined in research has been a concern of individual scholars and national bodies like the ICSSR. Reasons for a relatively slow process of synthesis lie partly within the educational and research system and partly in the nature of problems requiring research. First, teaching in social sciences is generally carried out in a manner which permits very little fusion of theory and facts. In fact, the two aspects are taught in separate papers and with differently based material. For example, syllabi have separate papers on Principles of Economics or Principles of Sociology, and Indian Economics or Indian Social System. The contents of the former are theories and propositions without any reference to facts and are mostly based on the standard British or American textbooks. The latter have a primarily descriptive and informative orientation and here, the Indian textbooks or sources provide the teaching material. The students hardly have an opportunity to relate one with the other, except in some advanced courses at the post-graduate level in a limited way.

Secondly, such of the social scientists who had an opportunity to learn to synthesise theory and facts, had it mostly in the institutions abroad; and such training, though generally useful, had the handicap of having been based on an alien empirical environment. Such Western trained scholars had the advantage of strong analytical rigour, but in the absence of adequate

empirical understanding of the Indian situation, it took some time, before their research efforts at home could go beyond mere marginal manipulation of Western concepts to accommodate Indian data, to the building up of new theoretical constructs, suitable to the needs of the Indian empirical context. Third, the socio-economic changes have been too swift in post-Independence India to allow time to shift the focus of social enquiry from 'what' to 'why'. Therefore, a large part of research has tended to be descriptive, throwing up useful information, but has fallen short of developing explanatory frameworks, due to highly complex and dynamic nature of the process under study. While it is relatively easy to comprehend and analyse a static or a linearly changing situation, a situation of rapid structural changes in social relations requires a truly dynamic framework of analysis which is difficult to develop. After all, the changes taking place in developing countries like India involve not just growth or a transition but a transformation, and that renders the task of the social scientists really difficult.

These limitations notwithstanding, the Indian social science, has developed capabilities, as a result of extensive and intensive developments during the last three decades, to deal with the emerging problems of economy and society, to the similar extent as social scientists in any country are able to perform this task. What is significant is that the institutional capacity,

support and recognition of social science research has increased manifold in a short period. The problems on the teaching front, however, remain, as pointed out earlier, and rectifying the situation by restructuring courses in social science disciplines and ensuring greater interaction between research and teaching, therefore, constitute an urgent and essential step for a balanced and fruitful development of social sciences in India.